

## IN RETROSPECT

### LEONARD D. WHITE AND THE INVENTION OF AMERICAN ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY

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Nearly half a century has passed since Leonard D. White published *The Federalists*, the first volume of his celebrated four-volume history of public administration in the United States. Almost from the moment of its publication, White's study was hailed as a classic. His third volume won the Bancroft prize, his fourth a Pulitzer. Solidly researched, lucidly written, and eminently judicious, it remains to this day the *only* comprehensive survey of federal public administration in the period between the inauguration of George Washington in 1789 and the elevation of Theodore Roosevelt to the presidency in 1901. This retrospective essay surveys the main themes of White's great work, explores his motives in writing it, and considers its relationship to contemporary scholarship on the relationship of state and society in the American past.

From the vantage point of the 1990s, the magnitude of White's achievement is easily overlooked. Few scholars today would challenge White's bedrock assumption that the history of the federal government is an appropriate topic for inquiry. In White's day, however, this claim was far more unusual. While historians prior to White had focused a good deal of attention on specific public policy debates and on doctrinal issues in constitutional law, they left the institutional history of the federal government largely untouched. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to suggest that, with the publication of these four volumes, White *invented* the subject of American administrative history as an academic field. Unlike earlier historians of American government, White took as his subject neither policy nor law. Rather, he chronicled the *process* of government, with a particular focus on key administrators, the crises they confronted, and the tasks they performed. White's interest in this process was at once institutional *and* cultural. That is, he sought not merely to describe how the government worked, but also to trace the evolution of what he called the "art of administration," by which he meant the general principles that administrators relied on in managing the

affairs of state.<sup>1</sup> In addition, and even more ambitiously, he hoped to offer some generalizations about the origins and growth of the attitudes that contemporary Americans held about public administration and its role in American life.

White's first volume, *The Federalists*, was organized around the administrative ideas of the Founding Fathers, which White labeled "Federalist" in tribute to the coalition of public figures who ran the federal government between 1789 and 1801. The Federalists, White contended, were sincerely committed to the establishment of an energetic central government that would serve the public good. Toward this end they recruited well-educated, socially prominent, and morally upstanding men to fill the various public offices. "Federalists," White explained, "accepted the philosophy of government for the people, but not government by the people. In their view, government could only be well conducted if it was in the hands of the superior part of mankind—superior in education, in economic standing, and in native ability" (p. 508).

White found especially noteworthy the consistently high caliber of the men who served in the federal government during these years. "Probably never in the history of the United States," White speculated, "has the standard of integrity of the federal civil service been at a higher level, even though the Federalists were sometimes unable to maintain their ideals" (p. 514). Fraud and peculation, he reported, with obvious satisfaction, were virtually unknown, as was the sale of public office, even though this practice remained commonplace in Europe. Indeed, White found much evidence to suggest that, overall, public standards for officeholding in the United States were higher than comparable standards in Great Britain and France. Only in Prussia were the standards more rigorous, and the Prussian government, at this time, was widely regarded as the best administered in the world.

The Federalists' achievement was particularly remarkable given the enormous *scale* upon which they operated. The federal government was newly established in 1789, yet it soon grew far larger than the governments of even the largest states. This was true, White observed, even though the state governments had been in existence long before 1789. The federal government also soon came to overshadow American business, which at this period was still in its "infancy." "No firm or enterprise," he stressed, "operated on so extensive a scale as either the contemporary Treasury, Post Office, or War Department" (p. 471).

The most important Federalist administrator was Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, who, in a rare burst of hyperbole, White termed "one of the great administrators of all time" (p. 126). White's admiration for Hamilton knew few bounds. White found particularly impressive the essays that

Hamilton prepared in 1787 and 1788 to support the ratification of the federal Constitution, and which, along with a related series of essays by James Madison and John Jay, have come to be known as the *Federalist*. Hamilton's contribution to this political classic, White wrote, was the "first systematic exposition of public administration" ever published, while Hamilton's treasury department was the "outstanding administrative achievement" of the age (pp. 127, 126). "It was Alexander Hamilton," White observed, "who first defined the term [public administration] in its modern usage and who first worked out a philosophy of public administration" (p. 478). White found particularly notable Hamilton's promulgation of the doctrine that public administrators had an obligation to be energetic in the execution of the law. This doctrine, he declared, was ample warrant for the claim that the serious study of public administration began not in Europe but in the United States.

For White, Hamilton stood alone. In the period between Hamilton's death in 1804 and the Civil War no public figure added anything of consequence to the stock of administrative ideas that Hamilton had articulated in the *Federalist*.<sup>2</sup> (Interestingly, he was silent about Madison's contribution to the *Federalist*, presumably because he considered Madison's essays to focus less on administration than on policy and law.) Equally unimaginative were the administrators who ran the federal government between 1869 and 1901. Only *after* 1901 would public administrators emerge whose contributions to administrative thought were in any way comparable to Hamilton's a century before. "The thirty-odd years from 1869 to 1901," White wrote, "had produced almost no interest in administration other than reform. The following thirty years, however, were decades of unparalleled progress in developing both the theory and the practice of the art of administration."<sup>3</sup>

Although the Federalists never regained power following their defeat in the election of 1800, White was convinced that the administrative system that they established remained influential long after that time. The enduring relevance of Federalist ideas and institutions was a major theme of White's second volume, *The Jeffersonians*, which traced the history of American public administration in the period between 1801 and 1829. Like *The Federalists*, *The Jeffersonians* was organized, as its title suggests, around the premise that the various administrative developments that took place during a particular epoch were the product of a distinctive cast of mind. And this cast of mind, White declared, had far more in common with the Federalists than was often supposed. In reaching this conclusion, he followed Henry Adams, whose magisterial history of public life in the period between 1801 and 1817 was one of the few historical studies that White specifically commended. Adams's *History* highlighted the continuity between the Federalist administrations of George Washington and John Adams and the Republican administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and White followed his lead.

White was far more critical of the Jeffersonians than he was of the Federalists. He doubted the seriousness of Jefferson's apprehensions with regard to the Federalists' political designs and was particularly skeptical about Jefferson's oft-voiced concern that the Federalists secretly yearned to restore the monarchy. And he faulted Jefferson for failing to pay sufficient attention to the day-to-day demands of the office. White was even more critical of Jefferson's successors, James Madison and James Monroe. Not only did these men cede an inordinate degree of power to Congress, but they also failed to champion a national program of public works, which was, during this period, one of the leading public issues of the day. This failure, White mused, deprived the United States of what might have been "fertile administrative experimentation" in this realm (*Jeffersonians*, p. 494). This missed opportunity was particularly puzzling since, during this period, "everyone agreed" that such a national program was "essential" and that only the federal government had the necessary means to supply the funds and the "general plan" (p. 483).

Notwithstanding these criticisms, White found the Jeffersonians' approach to public administration, on balance, to be quite similar to that of the Federalists. Jefferson might raise theoretical objections to the Federalists' vision of energetic government, yet, once in office, he was equally committed to the vigorous exercise of the levers of power. Only under Jefferson's successors, James Madison and James Monroe, would this commitment falter, a consequence, White believes, of their inability to transcend the constitutional pieties of the age. In addition, and no less importantly, White believed that the Jeffersonians shared the Federalists' broadly meritocratic approach to the recruitment and staffing of the civil government. Like the Federalists, they reserved their principal appointments for the well-to-do and the socially prominent and like the Federalists they refrained from using public patronage for partisan gain.

Characteristic of White's approach was his highly sympathetic portrait of John McLean, the postmaster general between 1823 and 1829. Many well informed contemporaries—including President John Quincy Adams and Secretary of State Henry Clay—regarded McLean as a hypocritical schemer who had secretly manipulated postal patronage to help bring about Adams's defeat in the election of 1828. White acknowledged these charges, yet found them unpersuasive. From his standpoint, it was simply inconceivable that McLean's high-minded denunciations of patronage politics concealed a narrowly political intent.<sup>4</sup>

Partisan maneuvering figured far more prominently in *The Jacksonians*, the third volume in White's series. In this book, White traced the administrative history of the federal government in the three decades between 1829 and 1861. Once again, White contended that a particular group of public

administrators—in this case, the “Jacksonians”—gave the administrative history of the period its distinctive cast. At the core of the Jacksonians’ administrative vision was their principled commitment to the democratization of the civil government. The Jeffersonians, no less than the Federalists, White observed, had mostly restricted appointments to the favored few. The Jacksonians, in contrast, were programmatically committed to opening the civil government to the ambitious man-on-the-make.

The classic expression of this democratic dogma, White contended, came in Andrew Jackson’s first annual address, in which Jackson articulated the doctrine of rotation in office. Henceforth, Jackson decreed, public office should be simple enough to be open to everyone and egalitarian enough so that no contemporary would treat the officeholder’s dismissal as a stain on his reputation. White emphatically rejected the notion that the wholesale dismissal of Adams partisans that the Jacksonians’ helped to legitimate was an “episode in political reprisals” aimed at officeholders who had sided with Adams in the election of 1828 (*Jacksonians*, p. 400).<sup>5</sup> Rather, he treated it as a rational response to the legitimate problems posed by the aging of the government work force. In addition, White credited the doctrine with slowing the emergence of a distinct officeholding class. No longer would incumbents treat public office as a kind of private property to which they possessed a vested right. And no longer would the country be saddled—as White explained, in *Introduction to the Study of Public Administration* (3d ed., 1948), published a few years earlier—with an “‘un-American’ bureaucracy” that “challenged the equalitarian basis of American democracy.” Jackson had “undoubtedly” feared the creation of such a bureaucracy; rotation in office laid these fears to rest (p. 279). Jackson, in short, was an “advocate of rotation in office” as a “defense against bureaucracy” (p. 572).

White was plainly impressed by the “new sense of democracy” that made public office accessible to the common man (p. 300). By opening the civil government to a new generation of Americans—including, for the first time, many men from humble backgrounds—rotation in office brought “endless sources of vitality” into the “body administrative” directly from the “body politic” (p. 566).

But he was far more skeptical of the Jacksonians’ opposition to a permanent civil service. The frequent dismissal of meritorious public officers, White contended, debased public expectations regarding official integrity and hastened the ascendancy of a notorious “spoils system” that would scandalize public-spirited Americans for the rest of the century. To be sure, these changes did not mark a “break in the system” (p. 553). In 1861, as in 1829, the administrative system continued to retain many features of the system that the Federalists had established in 1789. But the downward spiral was plain.

Had Alexander Hamilton lived to observe the workings of the civil government under the Jacksonians, he would have found its "external forms" substantially unchanged, but its spirit "strange and forbidding" (p. vii).

White took great pains to exonerate Jackson from any complicity in this decline. Jackson, he magnanimously declared, "can hardly be criticized for the purposes he sought to achieve—to destroy the idea of property in office, to cut down an officeholding class, and to give all citizens an equal opportunity to enjoy the privilege of participating in the task of self-government" (p. 5). It was a point in Jackson's favor, similarly, that, unlike the notorious city bosses of the Gilded Age, he strenuously opposed "honest graft" (p. 5). After all, Jackson shared the Federalists' commitment to a strong presidency and, in particular, to the proud tradition of administrative energy that the Federalists had promulgated when they had been in power.

Far more important in spurring this decline, White contended, were a number of concurrent changes in the wider society. White never discussed these changes in any great detail. Indeed, his history suffered from a certain vagueness on this score—and, in particular, from his failure to specify the mechanisms that brought about the various institutional changes that he described. White's treatment of rotation in office was no exception. Only rarely did he allude to the narrowly partisan considerations that helped make it such a prominent feature in American public life. For the most part he was content, rather, to attribute it to a variety of large-scale processes, including the rise in partisan maneuvering that followed the advent of universal manhood suffrage; a general lowering of moral standards in business and public life; and a yearning for self improvement that he attributed to the spirit of democracy. "It was *democracy* in America," White acknowledged, perhaps a touch wistfully, "not the executive power or the bureaucratic structure, that so forcibly struck Alexis de Tocqueville when he made his journey to the states in 1831" (p. 553).

None of these changes, White was convinced, had been deliberately set in motion by the Jacksonians. Rather, they were unanticipated, unintended, and unplanned. "The changes in the administrative system that developed during the Jacksonian years"—White explained, in summarizing his position—"were much less the consequence of bold innovation and pioneering in new fields of governmental activity, much more the result of changes in magnitude, in complexity, and in the influence of external forces, principally the political party" (p. 7).

Today White's approach is relatively uncontroversial. Like White, most historians have come to treat the rise of the spoils system as the inevitable byproduct of deeply rooted social changes and to scrupulously avoid any overtly moralistic pronouncements about its origins and consequences. Among

historians this tradition antedates White, going back at least as far as the publication of Frederick Jackson Turner's *Rise of the New West* in 1906. With the publication of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s, highly acclaimed *Age of Jackson* in 1944, it gained a measure of intellectual respectability. More recently, a few historians have gone so far as to treat rotation in office as a necessary precondition for the rise of modern bureaucratic methods, a conclusion that even White would have found troubling, since, of course, he had argued that it had had exactly the opposite effect.

In White's day, however, his approach was still somewhat novel. Many historians continued to view the Jacksonians from the vantage point of their nineteenth-century critics, treating the rise of "Jacksonian democracy" as more-or-less synonymous with the ascendancy of an overtly prosouthern, and covertly proslavery, political regime committed to manipulating political patronage in order to block the federal government from grappling directly with the leading issues of the day. White himself had adopted a similar position earlier in his career. Indeed, his longtime assistant Jean Schneider was much amused by the gradual softening of White's position on this score.<sup>6</sup> That White would be critical of the Jacksonians is hardly surprising. Like many historians of his day, White hailed from the anti-Jacksonian bastion of New England and supported the Republican party, heir to the anti-Jacksonian Whigs. In addition, he strongly opposed the politically motivated dismissal of public officers, a stratagem that, as late as the mid-twentieth century, continued to be regarded (with some justice) as the Jacksonians' principal contribution to American public life. Far more surprising was White's scrupulous refusal to implicate Jackson in the Jacksonians' political machinations and his general willingness to give the Jacksonians their due.

White's academic peers recognized the novelty of his position and responded accordingly. Historians sympathetic to the Jacksonians, such as Charles G. Sellers, Jr., praised White's positive assessment of the Jacksonians' commitment to political democracy and took special satisfaction in his favorable evaluation of the administrative ability of James K. Polk, a Jackson protégé whose biography Sellers was in the midst of completing.<sup>7</sup> Sellers also took note of White's favorable assessment of Amos Kendall, who served briefly as postmaster general under Andrew Jackson following the disastrous tenure of Jacksonian appointee William Barry. Prior to White, Kendall's administrative achievements had often been overlooked by historians who—following John Quincy Adams, Harriet Martineau, and a host of like-minded nineteenth-century commentators—derided him as a pliant tool of the proslavery South. White was more magnanimous and Sellers approved.

More critical were anti-Jacksonian historians such as Thomas P. Govan. As the biographer of the Philadelphia banker and Jacksonian nemesis Nicholas Biddle, Govan predictably found much to quarrel with in White's treatment

of the Jacksonians' regime. Govan faulted White for providing no evidence to substantiate his claim that rotation in office had opened the civil government to the common man. Govan also questioned White's easy assumption that this doctrine had, in fact, brought vitality into the administrative system. More broadly, he wondered whether rotation in office was truly more democratic than the older public trust doctrine that it supplanted.<sup>8</sup>

Govan's critique raised important questions about White's approach. Yet in a day in which Schlesinger's *Age of Jackson* was at the height of its popularity, it was not likely to stir up much serious debate. As a consequence, White's surprisingly favorable treatment of the Jacksonians' administrative record went largely unchallenged. It remains, with a few exceptions, the conventional wisdom among historians today. A remarkably similar point of view, for example, informs Sellers's *Market Revolution*, published in 1991.

White's *Jacksonians* was in many ways the most interesting volume in his series. But it was not the last. In a fourth and final volume, *The Republican Era*, he described American public administration in the period between the inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant in 1869 and the ascendancy of Theodore Roosevelt in 1901. *The Republican Era* was by far the weakest volume in the series. White was dying of cancer during the months of its preparation, and seems at times to have been almost overwhelmed by the sheer number of topics that he felt obliged to consider. Published posthumously, it is less exhaustive than White's earlier studies, and has been mostly superseded by Morton Keller's *Affairs of State* (1977).

The theme of *The Republican Era* was the continuity in administrative standards between the antebellum and postbellum periods. The Republican era, White wrote, brought few major changes in American public life. Rather, it was best understood as the "culmination of Jacksonian theory and practice, with all their strength and weakness" (p. viii). Interestingly, White named the volume after a historical epoch rather than a particular cohort of administrators. In large measure, one suspects, this was because White found it impossible to frame any credible generalizations about the Republicans as a group.

White was particularly intent on debunking historians such as Charles Beard who had stressed the transformations wrought by major conflicts such as the Civil War. Neither the Civil War, nor the Spanish-American War, White declared, left "much impression on civil institutions" (p. vii). According to historian Barry Karl, who queried White on this point, White's dismissal of the influence of these two wars on public administration had been shaped by his admiration for his University of Chicago colleague Louis Brownlow, who believed that the administrative changes set in motion by military mobilization could often be easily reversed.<sup>9</sup>

White had originally intended to extend his administrative history beyond



1901. Indeed, at one point he expressed a desire to continue it up to the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933.<sup>10</sup> Had White taken the story this far, he would have found it necessary to highlight the dramatic changes in public administration that took place during the Progressive era, the First World War, and the 1920s. At several points, White acknowledged that he understood these changes to be profound. If, thus, continuity in the administrative system was for White a main theme of American administrative history in the period between 1789 and 1901, change would have been a major concern in the period between 1901 and 1933.

It is impossible to know how White would have organized such a work. A few hints, however, can be gleaned from his unpublished writings. Several years before White began his administrative history, he observed in a memorandum that he understood the history of American public administration to involve four main themes: the establishment of the administrative system by the Federalists; the reconstitution of this system by the Jacksonians; its further reconstitution in the late nineteenth century with the advent of civil service reform; and its transformation in the twentieth century with the introduction of the principles of scientific management.<sup>11</sup> Had White carried the story past 1901, he presumably would have highlighted the last two of these themes. Neither are particularly conspicuous in *The Republican Era*, though White did touch briefly on the changes in the civil service that followed the passage of the Civil Service Act of 1883.

White's interest in administrative history grew out of his long involvement in public affairs. Trained in the 1910s as a political scientist at the University of Chicago, he taught briefly at Clark University and Dartmouth before returning to Chicago in the 1920s as a professor of political science, a position he held for the rest of his career. White was one of the first academics to make the study of public administration a major focus of inquiry and quickly emerged as a leading student in the field. In 1926 he published his *Introduction to Public Administration*, a textbook for public administrators—the first of its kind—which he revised three times over the course of the next thirty years. During the 1930s he served on the United States Civil Service Commission, and, following World War II, he helped establish the senior executive service, a program for recruiting college graduates into government careers. "Unless the present civil service is strengthened," White declared at one point, "the whole government will fail."<sup>12</sup> In honor of White's work, eulogists hailed him at his death in 1958 as the "Architect of Modern Civil Service."<sup>13</sup>

White's faith in the civil service was decisively shaped by his youthful enthusiasm for municipal reform, the topic of his doctoral dissertation. Like many Progressives, he idealized the scientific expertise of the city manager

and demonized the partisan politicking of the ward boss. White found particularly congenial the possible applicability to public administration of the scientific management methods that had been devised by engineers such as Frederick Winslow Taylor. "Taylorism," he wrote hopefully in an encyclopedia article in 1930, "is driving Jacksonian democracy into the limbo of outworn creeds in every extensive administrative system in America."<sup>14</sup> White lost his youthful enthusiasm for scientific management as he grew older, yet he never saw reason to challenge the closely related conviction that the impetus for administrative reform antedated the New Deal.<sup>15</sup>

White's familiarity with contemporary public administration shaped his approach to history in a number of ways. Most importantly, it provided him with a highly unusual vantage point from which to consider the various challenges that public administrators confronted. Unlike most academics, White empathized with civil servants and shared their confidence in the administrative apparatus as an instrument of reform. In addition, White hoped to provide the public administrators he knew so well with a heritage they could be proud of. White sought, above all, to demonstrate that a permanent, nonpartisan civil service could promote the cause of democracy, reconciling, as it were, the divergent visions of Alexander Hamilton and Andrew Jackson.<sup>16</sup>

White's determination to write such a history confronted him with a dilemma. How was he to proceed? No such history, after all, had yet been attempted. At least two alternatives suggested themselves. The first alternative was to treat American administrative history as a case study of a general phenomenon by drawing on the insights of social theorists such as Max Weber and Talcott Parsons. The second alternative was to eschew grand theory and concentrate instead on the detailed description of particular cultural and institutional forms. This latter method has long been championed by social scientists such as Robert E. Park, a vigorous proponent of the ethnographic method as a tool for inquiry, and a founder of what has come to be known as the "Chicago School" of social scientific research.

There can be little question but that White was familiar with both of these interpretative traditions. In the 1930s and 1940s, he had overseen a series of collaborative social scientific research projects at the University of Chicago that kept him abreast of the most recent work in the field. White himself had published numerous works that utilized social scientific methodology, focusing, in particular, on the attitudes toward public administrators of the public-at-large.<sup>17</sup> His familiarity with this body of scholarship is worth noting, since he is sometimes characterized as a naive empiricist ill-equipped to take advantage of the latest social scientific advances. Nothing could be further from the truth. By the time White published his history, he had been an active

and productive social scientist for almost forty years. His decision to eschew social scientific jargon owed less to his ignorance of the latest technical refinements than to his frustration with the loose (and often ill-informed) theorizing that was—and is—so characteristic of scholarship in this vein.<sup>18</sup>

It was, thus, entirely fitting that, in a prospectus for a political science course at the University of Chicago that White prepared in 1944, he had pointedly *rejected* a narrowly institutional approach toward American political development in favor of a broader, more sociological survey of the relevant themes. His course, he explained, would be organized around “the formula devised by sociologists—competition, conflict, compromise, and adjustment.” “No effort,” White added, was devoted to providing students with a “detailed familiarity” with American institutions of government: “We believe that it is important for an American student to have such information, but we are inclined to the opinion that he can only put the facts of the American system of government in a meaningful frame of reference if he has some such interpretative course by way of introduction.”<sup>19</sup>

White’s history was predicated upon a similar awareness of the importance of this broader frame of reference. In particular, he tried to integrate grand theory and ethnography into a single synthetic narrative. White’s grand theoretical interests were most evident in his chapters on administrative thought, which occasionally read more like a philosophical disquisition than a historical monograph. His ethnographic bent was best revealed by his forays into collective biography, a research strategy he had first employed in his doctoral dissertation on the city manager movement, in which he interviewed many of the principal administrators.

White, of course, could hardly interview Alexander Hamilton. As an alternative, he turned to the records that Hamilton and his colleagues had left behind. These White probed with a diligence surpassed by no previous scholar and unequalled by few today. His appetite for information was prodigious. In virtually every chapter, he gleaned fresh insights from the rich body of documents that had been generated by administrators, Congress, and leading commentators on public affairs. Prior to White, few historians had studied these records in any detail; even today, many of the sources that White relied on (such as the congressional serial set) are surprisingly little used. No one has done more to bring this storehouse of information to light or to organize it in a coherent fashion.

White did not labor alone. A skillful academic grantsman, he secured financial support from several sources, including the Public Administration Clearing House, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Social Science Research Committee of the University of Chicago. Equally important, White had the capable assistance of Jean Schneider, a Vassar graduate who worked with him

for many years locating documents, checking quotations, and polishing his prose. It was Schneider—as White freely conceded—who read through the congressional serial set to isolate the key documents on which his history was based. Schneider's assistance was particularly critical in *The Republican Era*, which she saw through the press following White's death. In recognition of Schneider's assistance, White included her name on the title page, a fact that the Pulitzer prize committee duly noted in its citation.

White's interest in primary sources extended beyond his own research. Well aware of the difficulties of studying public administration at the state level—a topic White largely ignored in his history—he contemplated at one point undertaking a series of "Dictionaries of State Administration on Historical Principles."<sup>20</sup> White's "Dictionaries" never appeared. In the 1950s, however, he did serve as the catalyst for the establishment of a major venture in documentary editing, the James Madison papers project. This project was begun at the University of Chicago under White's direction; it continues to this day at the University of Virginia. Ralph Ketcham, a historian who worked with White on the Madison papers project during its early years, remembers him as a tireless administrator who worked diligently to get the project up and running. White, Ketcham recalls, initially had little special interest in Madison, who came off rather poorly in his history. Rather, he had hoped to edit the papers of his hero, Alexander Hamilton. White shifted to Madison, Ketcham adds, only when he learned to his chagrin that a modern documentary edition of Hamilton's papers had been already begun at Columbia.<sup>21</sup>

Curiously, White's preoccupation with the preservation of the papers of public figures did not extend to those documenting his own life. Shortly before his death, he destroyed a great mass of personal papers that would almost certainly have provided insight into his work on the civil service commission as well as his academic career. According to Barry Karl, White took this step because he had grown weary of the search for a suitable biographer for his colleague, Charles E. Merriam, and did not believe, in any event, that his own career was worthy of such intensive investigation.<sup>22</sup> White's decision greatly upset Jean Schneider, who found herself in the awkward position, following White's death, of having to inform graduate students interested in White's public career that the materials for such a study no longer existed.<sup>23</sup> His decision also explains, at least in part, why White's contribution to American historical scholarship had been so often overlooked.

White's history of American public administration has not gone unchallenged. Some have criticized him for slighting the role in the historical process of ideology and unintended consequences.<sup>24</sup> Others have faulted him for his inattention to theory.<sup>25</sup> Still others have challenged particular features of his

argument, such as his highly sympathetic portrait of the Federalists' political goals or his critical assessment of Jefferson's administrative acumen.<sup>26</sup>

White is vulnerable on a number of these counts. He may well have exaggerated the Federalists' virtues and the Jeffersonians' faults. His characterization of the Jacksonians, similarly, paid too little attention to their narrowly partisan aims. Less persuasive are those critiques that fault White for his supposed lack of interest in ideas. True, White never used terms like ideology, which, after all, only gained widespread currency among historians after his death. Yet he was greatly interested in the varied and often competing administrative visions held by public administrators at different points in time. And he can hardly be faulted for failing to recognize the role of unintended consequences in human affairs. His treatment of the administrative consequences of rotation in office under the Jacksonians, for example, was a classic case study of just this theme.

It is equally mistaken to assume that White lacked theoretical rigor because he failed to wrap his analysis in social scientific garb. White deliberately chose his particular blend of cultural and institutional history not because he lacked the sophistication to conceive of possible alternatives, but because it offered him a sensible way to approach the subject at hand. Indeed, on many topics White's judgments are superior to those of more recent scholars, and in particular those political scientists who substitute theoretical speculations for a thorough engagement with the relevant sources. According to David M. Potter, a respected historian who had long championed the social scientific method, White's approach offered a valuable alternative to the formalism that so often marred scholarship on the role of government in public life.<sup>27</sup> This was an astute observation, and one with which many subsequent historians would fully concur.

The merits of White's approach are particularly evident in his discussion of rotation in office. Unlike more recent scholars, White stressed the antibureaucratic animus that underlay this reform. Given White's familiarity with the sources, he could hardly have done otherwise: virtually every major nineteenth-century commentator reached an identical conclusion. Later scholars, enamored of social theory, yet inattentive to the historical record, have rendered an opposite verdict. Turning White on his head, they have concluded that the spoils system was, on the contrary, a spawning ground for bureaucratic norms. Spoils bred bureaucracy, or so goes what has become a common refrain.<sup>28</sup> White's verdict is sounder, and has been confirmed by a number of recent specialized studies of administrative institutions that range from the land office and the federal armories to the postal system. However vital rotation in office may have been for political managers intent on finding financial incentives for the cadre men who staffed the mass party, it sapped

morale, weakened the capacity of the administrative apparatus, and failed to influence the main contours of modern administrative thought.<sup>29</sup>

Far more persuasive is the charge, as one early critic observed, that White neglected the "wider setting of a free society."<sup>30</sup> White's history *was* narrowly focused on the cultural and institutional dynamics of public administration. He displayed little interest in public policy, legal or constitutional doctrine, party politics, or many other topics that historians would be interested in today. In addition, he said virtually nothing about state or local administration, even though he wrote extensively on federalism, worried at times about the expanding scope of federal power, and was widely recognized as an authority on municipal reform. Given the specialized audience for whom his work was primarily intended, this is perhaps to be expected. Unfortunately, this narrowness of focus has tended to discourage historians animated by other concerns from drawing on White's masterful analysis of the workings of the administrative system in its formative years.

The recent upsurge of interest among historians, political scientists, and historical sociologists in institutional history—and, in particular, in a structuralist, state-centered approach to the history of public life that has come to be known as the "new" institutionalism—casts White's history in a new light.<sup>31</sup> Now that historians are scrambling to join political scientists and sociologists in the quest to "bring the state back in," it may well be time to reconsider White's pioneering attempt to write the history of the federal government.

White and the "new" institutionalists share a good deal in common. Both are committed to the comparative method; the intensive investigation of particular institutional settings over space and in time; and the expansion of the subject matter of political history beyond the narrow and often rarefied realms of electoral politics and the partisan maneuverings of the political elite. In addition, both share a faith in the possibilities of the administrative apparatus as an instrument of institutional reform.

In one regard, White's approach is plainly superior to that of the "new" institutionalists. To a greater extent than the bulk of this scholarship, White is sensitive to the importance of cultural traditions in shaping administrative outcomes. Indeed, to a striking degree he anticipates Richard L. McCormick's call for historians to focus less on electoral politics and particular policy regimes than on the visions of governance held by public figures and the public-at-large.<sup>32</sup> White's history, after all, is organized less around changing administrative regimes—the custom among "new" institutionalists today—than around competing visions of the public good: the Federalists' commitment to an active and energetic state, the Jacksonians' faith in political democracy. Indeed, White is so sensitive to these competing visions that at

several points—one thinks of his uncritical portrait of John McLean—he mistakes rhetoric for reality and obscures the narrowly partisan context within which decision making took place.

White's principal limitation from a "new" institutionalist standpoint is his disinclination to recognize that administrative outcomes can also be the products of their institutional setting. Unlike the "new" institutionalists, White rarely acknowledges that administrative systems can be transformed through political conflicts rooted in pre-established institutional arrangements.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, he consistently explains administrative transformations as the product either of large-scale social processes such as universal suffrage, or of distinctive visions of government such as political democracy. From a "new" institutionalist standpoint, his history is, thus, not institutional enough. Particularly telling in this regard is White's sweeping dismissal of the possible administrative implications of major military conflicts such as the Civil War. Similarly, White ascribes little causal significance to the *prior expansion* of the administrative apparatus in the years before Jackson's inauguration in explaining the rise of the mass party, even though it was the resources of the federal government—and, in particular, the jobs and contracts at the disposal of the party-in-power—that party managers relied on to rally support to the cause.

These limitations notwithstanding, historians interested in the relationship of state and society in the American past would do well to pay more attention to White's lucid, and often persuasive, analyses of many (though by no means all) of the key figures, movements, and events. Like most major works of historical scholarship, White's history can be read for purposes different from those for which it was originally intended. Few of these historians are likely to share all of White's premises. Yet all can profit from his impressive erudition, his sound judgment, and his workmanlike prose and, perhaps, even derive a modicum of inspiration from his heroic determination to include within the covers of a single work a comprehensive account of the complex and everchanging relationship of American culture, society, and the state.

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1. Leonard D. White, *The Federalists: A Study in Administrative History* (1948), p. vii.

2. See Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801–1829*

(1951), p. 556, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829–1861* (1954), pp. 362, 551.

3. Leonard D. White, *The Republican Era: A Study in Administrative History, 1869–1901* (1958), p. 19.

4. For a different interpretation of McLean's behavior, see Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (1995), pp. 79–83.

5. See also, White, *Introduction to the Study of Public Administration*, rev. ed. (1939), p. 279.

6. Phone interview with Ralph Ketcham, September 25, 1995.

7. Charles G. Sellers, Jr., review of *The Jacksonians*, in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (March 1955): 709.

8. Thomas P. Govan, review of Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians*, in *American Historical Review* 60 (April 1955): 622.

9. Phone interview with Barry Dean Karl, June 14, 1995.

10. Leonard D. White, "Request for Financial Support . . .," October 20, 1951, p. 2, Charles E. Merriam Papers, University Archive, University of Chicago.

11. White, "Request for Financial Support . . .," p. 3.

12. Quoted in "Leonard D. White, Architect of Modern Civil Service," *Good Government* 75 (March–April 1958): 15–16.

13. Leonard D. White, Architect of Modern Civil Service," pp. 14–17.

14. Leonard D. White, "Public Administration," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (1930) 1:442.

15. Herbert J. Storing, "Leonard D. White and the Study of Public Administration," *Public Administration Review* 25 (March 1965): 44. For a related discussion, see Barry Dean Karl, "Constitution and Central Planning: The Third New Deal Revisited," *Supreme Court Review* 6 (1988): 163–74.

16. Storing, "Leonard D. White," pp. 47–51.

17. See, for example, Leonard D. White, *The Prestige Value of Public Employment in Chicago* (1929). There is, unfortunately, no full bibliography of White's publications. For a list of White's publications between 1929 and 1939, see Louis Wirth, ed., *Eleven Twenty-Six: A Decade of Social Science Research* (1940), pp. 414–17.

18. Storing, "Leonard D. White," pp. 48–51.

19. Leonard D. White to John M. Gaus, November 9, 1944, Charles E. Merriam Papers.

20. Leonard D. White to Charles E. Merriam, October 20, 1941, Charles E. Merriam Papers. White had an abiding interest in the history of federalism and once considered writing a major work on this subject. Though White never completed this project, in the early 1950s he did deliver a series of lectures on federal-state relations at Louisiana State University. Leonard D. White to Charles E. Merriam, April 14, 1941, Charles E. Merriam Papers; Leonard D. White, *The State and the Nation* (1953).

21. Phone interview with Ralph Ketcham, September 25, 1995.

22. Phone interview with Barry Dean Karl, June 14, 1995.

23. Donald O. Dewey to Richard R. John, November 9, 1995, in author's possession.

24. James M. Banner, Jr., "Historians and the Impeachment Inquiry: A Brief History and Prospectus," *Reviews in American History* 4 (June 1976): 145.

25. James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (1990), p. 22.

26. Carl Prince, *The Federalists and the Origins of the U.S. Civil Service* (1977); Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Process of Government under Jefferson* (1978).

27. David M. Potter, review of *The Federalists* and *The Jeffersonians*, in *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 9 (April 1952): 270.

28. Lynn L. Marshall, "The Strange Stillbirth of the Whig Party," *American Historical Review* 72 (January 1967): 445–68; Matthew A. Crenson, *The Federal Machine: Beginnings of Bureaucracy in Jacksonian America* (1975); Michael Nelson, "A Short, Ironic History of American National Bureaucracy," *Journal of Politics* 44 (August 1982): 747–78.

29. Malcolm J. Rohrbrough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789–1837* (1968), pp. 271–94; Merritt Roe Smith, *Harpers Ferry Armory*



and the New Technology: *The Challenge of Change* (1977), pp. 252–304; John, *Spreading the News*, pp. 227–48, 334–35, n. 117.

30. Adrienne Koch, review of White, *Jeffersonians*, in *American Historical Review* 57 (January 1952): 465.

31. Major works in this tradition include Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of American Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (1982); Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (1990); Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (1994); and Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (1992). Interestingly, though all of these scholars have made important contributions to American political history, none received their graduate training in this field; Skowronek, Bensel, and Shefter were trained as political scientists, Skocpol as a sociologist.

For a lucid statement of the “new” institutionalists’ working assumptions, see Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (1985), pp. 3–37.

32. Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (1986).

33. Skowronek, *Building a New American State*, p. ix.